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Orig. under Markham

The Politics Of Heroin in Southeast Asia

By Alfred W. McCoy. With Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams II. Illustrated. 464 pp. New York: Harper & Row. $10.95.

A movie natural, with a part for the C.I.A.

By JAMES M. MARKHAM

It looks as though *Papaver somniferum*, the rather beautiful opium poppy, is going to provide us with a new genre of film, fiction, journalism and, even, scholarship. This is understandable. Heroin addiction is savaging our cities. "Any nation that moves down the road to addiction, that nation has something taken out of its character," President Nixon observed last March shortly after his return from China, once the most addicted of nations. Mr. Nixon has declared "war" on heroin at home—and galvanized his emissaries abroad. In certain parts of the world, American diplomats now give almost monomaniacal attention to persuading frequently indifferent or corrupt officials to do something about poppy cultivation, heroin refining and heroin trafficking.

Moreover, from the perspective of a journalist or film-maker, the subject is a natural, replete with ignorant hill tribesmen hacking away at their poppy fields in remote corners of Asia, ragtag paramilitary smugglers leading vast mule caravans across cloud-shrouded mountains, shadowy Chinese middlemen bribing high-ranking officials to look the other way, cosmopolitan Corsican intriguers arranging for stewardesses to strap on "body packs" of No. 4 heroin and fly to New York, intrepid undercover agents trying to foil all of the aforementioned and—last, but by no means least important—the junkies on our streets, symptoms and carriers of disquieting diseases.

This book, the first work of near-scholarship in the new genre, comes to us redolent of controversy [see The Last Word]. Before it was even in galleys—on June 1—the Central Intelligence Agency dispatched an employe to Harper & Row in New York to warn the company that the book could well be inaccurate, libelous and "damaging to the interests of this country," according to the recollection of Executive Editor M. S. Wyeth. The next day Alfred McCoy testified before a Senate subcommittee about alleged involvement of high-ranking South Vietnamese officials, Air America and others in the opium business. Alarmed, the C.I.A.'s General Counsel, Lawrence R. Houston, stepped up the pressure, and on July 5 asked to "see the text prior to publication" in order to point out its inaccuracies.

In a display of post-Irving caution—and over the author's objections—Harper & Row agreed on July 19 to let the C.I.A. consider the galleys for a week and submit its criticisms, on the understanding that the publishers would be under no obligation to make any changes. The mountain at Langley, Va., labored and produced a mouse. The 1,500-word critique the Agency returned to Harper & Row on July 28 understandably "underwhelmed" the editors (who appeared to have been concerned mainly about libel suits) and they decided to proceed with the publication of the book.

The C.I.A.'s clumsy intervention—particularly when linked to its ongoing efforts to prevent a former agent, Victor L. Marchetti, from even writing a book about the Agency for Alfred A. Knopf—is seriously disturbing. So is Harper & Row's submission of the book for prepublication criticism; it sets a worrying precedent even if the company maintains, as it does, that this was a special case. But the C.I.A. assaulted the McCoy book like a bull lunging at a matador's outstretched cape. For what the 27-year-old Yale graduate student has given us is not—as advertised—an expose of "C.I.A. involvement in the drug traffic" but rather a fascinating, often meticulous unraveling of the byzantine complexities of the Southeast Asian opium and heroin trade. To be sure, McCoy weaves a New Left anti-C.I.A. leitmotif throughout his pages and at times lapses into the error (usually made by angry non-Americans) of crediting American espionage with history-bending powers. Thus, in the early (and weakest) chapters of the book we are led to believe that if the O.S.S. had not backed the Mafia in Sicily at the end of World War II and if the C.I.A. had not sponsored Corsican mobsters as anti-Communist strikebreakers on the Marseilles waterfront, these two underworld groups would have subsided into well-deserved oblivion and never gotten into heroin trafficking.

As a former C.I.A. agent told Seymour Hersh (who unearthed the pre-publication fiasco), McCoy's assertions are "10 per cent tendentious and 90 per cent of the most valuable contribution I can think of." "He's a very liberal kid," the ex-agent continued, "and he'd like to nail the establishment. But some leading intelligence officers inside the Government's program think that his research is great." Well they might. For McCoy has done his homework, and, unlike most authors of books about spooks and mobsters, he gives us a rich set of footnotes. It is too bad they are not at the bottom of the pages, because this is a book to be read in tandem with its footnotes. Some assertions in the text are stronger than the footnotes they rest on; many are not.

The book's strength does not lie in its finger-wagging approach to history, but in its astounding-but-true tales of exotic rivalries that make up the heroin trade. Have you ever heard, for example,

James M. Markham, who was a correspondent for The Associated Press in South Asia and Africa, now reports frequently on drug problems for The Times.

CIA 4.01 Drug Traffic
✓ Air America
CIA 4 - Laos
CIA 1.03 Houston, Lawrence
CIA 1.04 Marchetti, Victor
Soc. 4.01.2 - Alfred Knopf
✓ Harper & Row
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